# INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF RUSSIA AND POLITICAL HISTORY

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#### Abstract / Résumé

The author presents a brief history of the Indigenous people of the Russian Federation, noting the different types of government policies over past centuries. She then outlines changes under the more democratic emphasis of the current Russian Federation. New initiatives indicate the possible restoration of languages and education systems. There is also the potential for new, culturally appropriate, adminstrative systems.

L'auteure présents un résumé de l'histoire des peuples autochtones de la Fédération russe en mettant en évidence les politiques gouvernementales adoptées au cours des siècles. Elle présente ensuite un aperçu des changements suscités par le démocratisation de la Fédération russe actuelle. De nouvelles initiatives indiquent la restauration possible d'un système d'éducation axé sur les autochtones et de l'utilisation des langues autochtones. Elles indiquent aussi l'établissement potentiel de nouveaux systèmes administratifs adaptés aux différences culturelles.

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According to a list included with Government Decree 255 dated March 24, 2000 "On the Unified Enumeration of Small Indigenous Nations of the Russian Federation", 40 nations are classified as small Indigenous nations of the North, Siberia and the Far East of Russia. Their population is estimated at approximately 180,000 people residing in 28 regions of the Russian Federation. The regions of the Far North and similar areas make up about 64% of the territory of the country. The total population of the North accounts for approximately 8% of the entire population of the Russian Federation.

The North accounts for 20% of the national income and about 60% of total export earnings. A the same time, the transport and social infrastructure of the northern regions is underdeveloped, and it encumbers economic development of the Far North.

The current state of the Indigenous population can be called critical because the living standard is low compared to the rest of the country's population. The level of subsistence is low, national languages are endangered and a number of nationalities are being driven to extinction. At one time independent of the Russian state, the Indigenous population was integrated in the Tsarist Russian and later Soviet society. In the course of time these ethnic groups have experienced different methods of governance which had different consequences. This paper examines state policies towards the population of the North of Russia and their consequences.

The policy towards Indigenous population of the North of Russia can be roughly divided into three periods: pre-revolutionary (or Tsarist), Soviet, and post-Soviet. Each period is characterized by different types of power, and by basic methods and attitudes of the state towards the Indigenous population. In the first period power, resided with the Tsar, and featured policies aimed at developing new territories in the North-East and colonizing Indigenous populations. However it also aimed at preserving traditional government institutions and the subsistence system. During the Soviet period society was governed by the Communist Party: the social system was totalitarian and the foundations of the traditional mode of life of Indigenous populations were forcibly changed. The post-Soviet period features social change, more democratic methods of governance, a renaissance of the traditional cultures of small nations and the implementation of a new market economy.

The development of the North by the Russian state was accompanied by the colonization of its Indigenous population and has a long history. It started in the northern part of European Russia, when the Saami were the first people to pay levy to the state of Novgorod beginning in the 13th century.

The Samoyeds, Tungus and others were subjected to *yasak* (fur tax) as early as the 17th century. In the first half of the 18th century, the Itelmens and Koryaks were annexed to Russia, then came the turn of the Eskimo and Ainu of the Kuril Islands. The Chukchi were incorporated as "not totally dependent on the government" people as stated by the decree of Empress Catherine II dated 1789.<sup>2</sup>

Territorial expansion and numerous other matters led to construction of well-enforced towns and the collection of levies. The organization of military expeditions drove the Tsarist government to set up the Siberian Department in 1637. The Department was the main governing body over the non-Russian population.

The incorporation of Indigenous populations into the Russian state was not altogether smooth. Different nations rebelled against intolerably heavy levies and abuse from the intruders. Even the royal decrees mentioned that levy collection should be mild and the economy of Indigenous populations should not be damaged.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, should any nation want to secede from the power of the Tsar, the rebels were to be exterminated. This is well illustrated by the extermination of the Anaul clan of Chuvan people by the detachment of Semen Dezhnev, and by the numerous decrees of Empress Anna Ioanovna and Senat on the extermination of the rebellious nation of the Chukchi.<sup>4</sup>

By the time of colonization the Indigenous peoples of the North had already developed subsistence patterns in accordance with their natural environment, as well as regulations concerning social relations, mutual aid, public support of the disabled, orphans and widows, regulations of collective use of certain territories (hunting grounds, fishing sites, reindeer pastures), property relations and inheritance. Most of the Indigenous nations led a nomadic life and were organized in autonomous clans or territorial communities based on common law. Under these circumstances the Tsarist policy towards the Indigenous population rested on indirect control through the traditional institutions of the community.<sup>5</sup>

By the early 19th century peasants started to settle in Siberia in increasing numbers. Two groups of populations—newcomers and Aboriginals—entered into commercial relations, making deals and contracts (loans, leases etc.). It became necessary to establish legal regulations and judicial bodies as well as to define the status of the non-Russian population. All these points were defined in the main act on the Indigenous population, entitled "Regulations of Indigenous population" of 1822.

The act of 1822 was the first legal act to define the status of the Indigenous population, preserving its traditional administration and economy. Moreover, the Regulations prohibited Russians from settling in the

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area of clan communities without asking their permission. Hiring manpower was allowed "with the consent of clan administration". Imports and the sale of liquor were strictly forbidden.

According to S. K. Patkanov, the overall number of Indigenous peoples of Siberia amounted to 822,000 people in 1897, including Yakuts and Buryats (Dolgikh, 1960:615).

The revolution of October 1917 led to a change of attitude towards the Indigenous population as seen by the Decree of the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee dated 20/06/1924. The Committee on assisting the nationalities of the North was set up to attend to the problems of the Indigenous population. The basic principle of this Committee was non-interference with the development of traditional societies and the creation of new bodies of autonomous administration. The Indigenous population, then made up some 65% of the overall population (ranging from 47% in Khanty-Mansiyskiy National Okrug to 96% in Chukotskiy National Okrug).

The late 1920s and early 1930s saw a drastic change in the policy towards forced integration of nomadic nations into the newly-formed Soviet society. These years were marked by cooperation of individual households and later by total collectivization. The administration underwent sovietization, while collectivism and Marxism were actively advocated. From this time on until the middle of the 20th century collectivization became the major factor of reorganizing traditional economy and social life. Not only were the means of production socialized, but the previous subsistence system was transformed. Traditional households based on family relations gave way to collective farms sustained by state subsidies. Overall control and registration were introduced, and the economic, social and political lives of the Indigenous people were strictly regulated.

Food, fuel and energy supply of cities and villages were reorganized on a centralized basis. Villages were consolidated and relocated close to seaports and airports. Doing this destroyed the traditional inhabitation patterns of many nations whose life and culture were dependent on certain ecological niches. Opposition to collectivization among Indigenous population was organized by reindeer-herding Chukchi in the early 1950s. Reindeer herding or any other type of economic activity outside collective farms had been forbidden. The government turned into the principal employer, owner and manager of natural resources.

In order to ensure its control over the population the government actively followed the policy of making nomadic reindeer herders and hunters settle in one area, a policy which lasted right up to 1990. Between 1968 and 1990 232,000 people were forced into a settled mode of life.<sup>7</sup>

The development of natural resource deposits and new branches of agriculture stimulated an influx of settlers who soon outnumbered the Indigenous population. Economic change and domination by newcomers brought about the transformation of the social and professional structure of the Indigenous population which led to their taking underpaid jobs requiring few qualifications.

State administration demanded uniform regulation of international relations based on the language and culture of the major nation, Russia. The first post-revolutionary decades saw the expansion of national languages as an incentive to the cultural development of small nations: writing systems for Indigenous languages were created, newspapers and supplements were published, schools where national languages were taught were set up. Then, in the latter half of the 20th century, school education underwent russification. As more Indigenous children studied in boarding schools with Russian-speaking teachers and tutors, and with the cuisine different from local traditional foods, communication ties between generations were disrupted. Indigenous families could no longer preserve and translate the ancient culture of northern nations. These negatives affected the mentality of people and stimulated marginalization of certain groups of Indigenous population.

In general, during the Soviet period the policy of collectivization destroyed the very foundations of the traditional subsistence system. Reorganization of reindeer breeding throughout the Soviet period resulted in the decay of reindeer breeding culture in a number of regions. The state appropriated all the resources and disposed of them at its discretion.

The systemic crisis of the socialist society in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in the dramatic deterioration of all socio-economic indicators and curtailment of welfare programs. As for the Indigenous population, it suffered a decline of traditional forms of economic activity and a drastic fall of the quality of life compared to other social groups. According to research done by the Institute of Cytology and Genetics and the Institute of Small Nations of the Russian Academy of Sciences, about 10 nations are now on the brink of extinction.<sup>8</sup>

The growth rate of the Indigenous population decreased some 2.3 times between 1990 and 1998. For Khants, Evens, and Oroki, this rate dropped 3-4 times, for Nanais, by 5.6 times, for Ulchi, by 6.5 times, and for Nivkhi by 8.6 times. In 1998 the mortality rate exceeded the birth rate for Saami, Nganasans, Negidals, Aleuts, Enets, Kumandins and Shors.

The assimilation of Indigenous ethnic groups has been spurred by the increase in mixed marriages which run up to 34-84%.

Compared to the first half of the 20th century, education in national languages is practically non-existent while the number of students learning native languages is decreasing. Only 48.8% of Indigenous children are learning their native languages. The best rates are recorded for Chukchi (75.6%), Dolgans (73.9%), Kets (66.2%), Nenets (57.9%). Low rates are characteristic of Saami (13.7%), Udege (18.2%), Nivkhi (29.6%), Selkups (28.9%), Mansi (33%).<sup>10</sup>

The current economic crisis has caused grave changes in the social and professional structures of Indigenous populations between 1990 and 1998, as illustrated by the following statistical data. The traditional sector employed 53% of Indigenous population in 1993 and only 39% in 1996. According to recent data the traditional sector employs less than 10% of Tofalars, 13% of Nivkhi, 14% of Nanais, 19% of Mansi, 20% of Khants. Employment in the service sectors has increased 2.6 times in the public utilities, 2% in health and social welfare services, 70.8% in education, 48.4% in culture and arts, 43.9% in administration. In these sectors the Indigenous population has to take underpaid jobs.

According to the data of the Ministry of Federation and Nationalities of Russia, unemployment in the Indigenous villages of the North averages no less than 40-50%. In some villages in the Koryak Autonomous Okrug, unemployment amounts to 75-80%. Unemployment is rising among Nanais (42%), Nganasans (51%), Selkups (about 60%), Kets (about 58%), Orochi (about 80%), and Enets (87%). 13

The experts of the Ministry have concluded that this crisis is partly caused by neglecting specific features of the North in economic reform.

The programs of economic and social development of the small nations of the North (#145 dated 11.03.1991 and #1099 dated 13.09.1996) approved by the government of the Russian Federation, have not been accomplished. The main goals of these programs were to fund the development of Native enterprises, the construction of houses, meet the objectives of the health service, culture and education, and to stabilize the critical social and economical situation. Some experts have pointed out grave methodological mistakes in dealing with the problems of Indigenous populations in the government program "Economic and Social Development of the Small Nations to 2010."

Despite the deep crisis affecting Indigenous populations, democratization of Russia since the late 1980s has helped the Indigenous nations appreciate their past. Now they must examine the current state of their languages, culture, and traditional types of economic activity, as well as their legal status. Development of national self-consciousness is proven by the fact that people realize the importance of reviving and preserving

Indigenous culture, strengthening the unity of ethnic groups, and acquiring sovereignty and property rights on land. It was in the late 1980s that associations of Indigenous nations were set up throughout the country, from the Kola to the Chukotka peninsulas.

Mass media have become an effective means of ethnic mobilization. The contents of national newspapers and their supplements, national TV programs which have been broadcast since the first quarter or middle of the 20th century (in Chukotskiy Autonomous Okrug, Khanty-Mansiyskiy AO, and Yamalo-Nenetskiy AO) changed a lot. They have projected the energy of Indigenous people striving to improve their lives. In other regions national newspapers and TV stations have been set up with the aim of covering the problems of Indigenous population. Extinction of language is considered a loss of culture. There can be no nation without a language, say Indigenous people.

Folklore festivals, competitions in national sports, and various centers of ethnic cultures have been organized in many regions and have gained much popularity.

The revival of traditional economies is connected with Native enterprises which have been organized in almost all regions. According to the data of the Ministry of Federation and Nationalities of the Russian Fedaration, Indigenous people have set up about 1600 clan communities and 300 Native enterprises, 200 of which engage in reindeer breeding. Yet these enterprises have very little experience in surviving in the market economy.

The development of ethnic self-consciousness and the renaissance of languages and cultures of Indigenous populations all over the country shapes the attitude of local administration to these phenomena. I would like now to examine the level of political consciousness of both regional leaders and Indigenous populations in general as exemplified by Chukotka. <sup>16</sup>

The social activity of Indigenous populations in the early 1990s and the support these activities received from the national newspaper Murgin Nutenut (Our Region, published in 3 Indigenous languages) by the mid-1990s, provoked concern among local authorities. Consequently, without any legitimate grounds, the paper was reorganized and turned into a supplement of the regional newspaper "The Far North" published in Russian. The team of professional journalists consisting of about 10 Aboriginals was fired. Unfortunately the paper is still published as a monthly supplement edited by one person.

Another characteristic example is the Ten-Year Program of Chukotka Indigenous Peoples to 2004. This was aimed at the construction of houses and improvements in health services, culture and education. This program presents an insight into regional administration policies on sports, culture,

education and social welfare. There are practically no activities reflecting political activity of the Indigenous population. Political life in the region has been regulated by the representatives of newcomers.

I assume there is the same situation in other regions of Russia. That's why Indigenous peoples demand a quota for Indigenous representatives in executive and legislative bodies.

In compliance with the federal law on public associations, the status of associations such as RAIPON, restrains them from political activity. Now the only instance of political organization among Indigenous populations is the regional political association "Renaissance of Chukotka".

There is no single coordinating agency for Indigenous populations at the level of the federal and most of the regional governments. More than 20 ministries, departments and committees attend to the problems of Indigenous populations in one way or another. There is no systematic work by the National Committee on the Ten-Year Program of Russian Indigenous Peoples. The Federal Assembly approved the laws "On Securing the Rights of Small Nations of the Russian Federation" (1999),<sup>17</sup> and "On Basic Principles of Organization of Communities of the Small Indigenous Nations of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation" (2000).<sup>18</sup> Experts say that in spite of some flaws, these laws form a sufficient legal basis for such an agency.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile RAIPON encompasses 30 regional associations. The Association has established cooperation with a government committee on the development of the North and partnership with international organizations. An Academic League and Youth League have been formed under the auspices of the Association. International projects aimed at promoting the institutions of Indigenous population, human rights and environment protection, and creating an information network among Indigenous nations are under way.

The recent 4th Congress of Small Indigenous Nations, which took place in April 2001, proved that the self-consciousness of Indigenous people is progressing as they realize that they must shoulder responsibility for their own destiny. Land property rights of Indigenous populations, participation in regional executive and legislative agencies, and the legal status of small nations were defined as the burning issues of the day.<sup>20</sup>

Over the last decade the Indigenous nations of Russia made their first steps onto the international stage. Now RAIPON is a permanent member of the Arctic Council. In 2000 the United Nations established the Permanent Forum on Indigenous nations. International cooperation is aimed not only at coping with ecological and legal problems but also at enriching the

association's experience of institutional development at the national and regional level.

To sum up, the Indigenous populations of Russia have experienced the impact of different political systems. Under Tsarist rule, Indigenous nations preserved their subsistence systems and traditional administration. During the Soviet period, Indigenous nations were integrated into Soviet society by force. Most of the Indigenous people were forced into settled modes of life. Traditional subsistence systems were destroyed. The government became the principal owner of all kinds of resources. Now, thanks to the general process of democratization in Russia, the national population is willing to preserve and revive national languages and cultures. According to a poll conducted by the Ministry of Labor of the Russian Fedeartion in 1998, 60% of the Indigenous population is engaged in traditional types of economic activity.<sup>21</sup> People are coming to realize their responsibilities for both their nations and the motherland.

# Supplement 1: The Unified Enumeration of the Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Federation<sup>1</sup>

Authorized by a decision of the Government of the Russian Federation from March 24, 2000, No. 255.

Name of people	Territory of Russia
1. Aleuts	Kamchatskaya Oblast (O.), Koryakskiy Autonomous Okrug (AO)
2. Aliutors	Koryakskiy AO
3. Chelkans	Altay Republic
4. Chukchi	Chukotskiy AO, Koryakskiy AO, Sakha Republic*
5. Chuvans	Chukotskiy AO, Magadanskaya O.
6. Chulyms	Tomskaya O., Krasnoyarskiy Kray (K)
7. Enets	Taymyrskiy AO
8. Eskimo	Chukotskiy AO
9. Evenks	Sakha Republic, Evenkiyskiy AO, Krasnoyarskiy K., Khabarovskiy K., Amurskaya O., Sakhalinskaya O., Buryatia Republic, Irkutskaya O., Chitinskaya O., Tomskaya O., Tiumenskaya O.

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Name of people	Territory of Russia
10. Evens	Sakha Republic, Khabarovskiy K., Magadanskaya O., Chukotskiy AO, Koryakskiy AO, Kamchatskaya O.
11. Dolgans	Taymyrskiy AO, Krasnoyarskiy K., Sakha Republic
12. Itelmens	Koryakskiy AO, Kamchatskaya O.
13. Kamchadals	Kamchatskaya O., Koryakskiy AO
14. Kerek	Chukotskiy AO
15. Kets	Krasnoyarskiy K.
16. Koryaks	Koryakskiy AO, Kamchatskaya O., Chukotskiy AO, Magadanskaya O.
17. Kumandins	Altayskiy K., Altay Republic, Kemerovskaya O.
18. Khants	Khanty-Mansiyskiy AO, Yamalo- Nenetskiy AO, Tiumenskaya O., Tomskaya O., Komi Republic
19. Mansi	Khanty-Mansiyskiy AO, Tiumenskaya O., Sverdlovskaya O., Komi Republic
20. Nanais	Khabarovskiy K., Primorskiy K., Sakhalinskaya O.
21. Nganasans	Taymyrskiy AO, Krasnoyarskiy K.
22. Negidals	Khabarovskiy K.
23. Nenets	Yamalo-Nenetskiy AO, Nenetskiy AO, Archangelskaya O., Taymyrskiy AO, Khanty-Mansiyskiy AO, Komi Republic
24. Nivkhi	Khabarovskiy K., Sakhalinskaya O.
25. Oroki	Sakhalinskaya O.
26. Orochi	Khabarovskiy K.
27. Saami	Murmanskaya O.
28. Selkups	Yamalo-Nenetskiy AO., Tiumenskaya O., Tomskaya O., Krasnoyarskiy K.
29. Soyots	Buryatiya Republic

Name of people	Territory of Russia
30. Shors	Kemerovskaya O., Khakasiya Republic, Altay Republic
31. Taz	Primorskiy K.
32. Telengits	Altay Republic
33. Teleuts	Kemerovskaya O.
34. Tofalar	Irkutskaya O.
35. Tubalars	Altay Republic
36. Tuvinian-Todzins	Tyva Republic
37. Udege	Primorskiy Kray, Khabarovskiy K.
38. Ulchi	Khabarovskiy K.
39. Veps	Kareliy Republic, Leningradskaya O.
40. Yukagirs	Sakha Republic, Magadanskaya O., Chukotskiy AO*

<sup>\*</sup> In the Unified Enumeration of the Indigenous Peoples of Russian Federation the regions of Republic Sakha and Chukotskiy AO are not mentioned. There are approximately 450 Chukchi in Republic Sakha and 113 Yukagirs in Chukotkiy AO (census, 1998).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The original name in Russian is Postanovlenie Pravitelstva Rossiyskoy Federatsii #255 ot 24 marta 2000 g. "O yedinom perechne korennykh malochislennykh narodov Rossiyskoy Federatsii". In the Unified Enumeration of the Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Federation are listed 44 Indigenous peoples, including Abazins, Besermens, Yzhors, and Nagaibaks, not listed here. Only the 40 nations above mentioned are members of RAIPON.

#### **Notes**

- Postanovlenie Pravitelstva Rossiyskoy Federatsii # 255 ot 24 marta 2000 g. "O yedinom perechne korennykh malochislennykh narodov Rossiyskoy Federatsii", "Mir korennykh narodov—zhivaya Arktika" (Indigenous Peoples' World-Living Arctic), Moscow 3:44-46.
- See also: Vysochaishe utverzhdennyi 22 ijulia 1822 goda Ustav Ob upravlenii inorodtsev (Regulations of Indigeous population of 1822), 1998 Natsionalnaya Politika v imperatorskoy Rossii (National Politics in the Tzarist Russia), ed. Yu I. Semenov, Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Ethnology and Anthopology, Moscow, Staryi Sad: 142, 148-149, 156.
- 3. Ukaz Senatskiy 24 sentiabria 1745 goda "O komandirovanii v Sibir Pokovnika Vulfa dlia issledovania obid i pritesneniy, uchinennykh tamoshnim narodam pri sbore iasaka.". (Senat Decree 24 September 1745 On Mission of Colonel Vulf to Siberia for Inquiring Offences and Oppressions Causing to the Local Peoples During Collecting the Levies), 1998 Natsionalnaya politika v imperatorskoy Rossii (National Politics in the Tzarist Russia), ed Yu I. Semenov, Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Moscow, Staryi Sad: 99-100.
- 4. Reshenie Senata ob okonchatelnom istreblenii "nemimykh chukch" (Decree Senat on the Final Extermination of Rebellious Chukchi), 1935 Kolonialnaya Politika Tsarizma na Kamchatke i Chukotke v XVIII veke (Colonial Politics of Tzarism in Kamchatka and Chukotka in XVIII century), Archive materials, eds. YaP. Alkor and A.K. Drezen, Nauchno-Izdatelskaya Assotsiatsia Instituta norodov Severa TsIK SSSR, trudy po istorii, Vol. II, Leningrad, Izdatelstvo Instituta norodov Severa TsIK SSSR: 162-163.
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- 6. Ibid., 7.
- Socialno-ekonomicheskije usloviya zhizni malochislennykh narodov Severa (Social and economic situation of the small nationals of the North), Moscow, 1993:149.
- 8. Sevemyje narody Rossii na puti v novoje tysiacheletije (The Northern Nations of Russia on the Eve of New Millenium), Moscow, 2000:100.
- 9. Ibid., 2000:100.

- 10. Ibid., 2000:101.
- 11. Ot patemalizma k partnerstvu (From Patemalism to Partnership) ed. A.N. Piliasov, Magadan, 1998:98.
- 12. Sevemyje narody Rossii na puti v novoje tysiacheletije (The Northern Nations of Russia on the Eve of New Millenium), Moscow, 2000:128.
- 13. Ibid., 2000:128, 129.
- 14. Ibid., 2000:97.
- 15. Ibid., 2000:134.
- 16. See also: Patty, Gray A. 2000 Chukotkan Reindeer Husbandry in the Post-socialist Transition, Polar Research 19(1):31-37.
- 2000 Federal Law "O garantijakh prav korennykh malochislennykh narodov Rossijskoy Federatsii" Severnyje norody Rossii na puti v novoje tysiacheletije (The Northern Nations of Russia on the Eve of New Millenium), Moscow: 216-223.
- 2000 Federal Law "Ob obschikh parincipakh organizatsii obschin korennykh malochislennykh marodov Severa, Sibiri i Dalnego Vostoka Rossiyskoy Federatsii", Supplement to the journal "Mir korennykh narodov—zhivaya Arktika" (Indigeous Peoples' World—Living Arctic), Moscow 5-11.
- 19. Ibid, 2000 Veselov, A. Chto izmenit Zakon...? (What Do Change the Law?): 12-14; Todyshev, M. Kak budet rabotat' Zakon? (How Will Carry out the Law?): 15; see also: Arakchaa, K.D., Sumina, E.M. 1999 "Prava korennykh narodov i okhrana okruzhajuschey sredy v Rossiyskoy Arktike" (Indigenous Rights and Environment in the Russian Arctic), Zhivaya Arktika (Living Arctic), 2:5-12.
- 20. Interviews with the RAIPON regional leaders, 12-14 April 2001, Moscow.
- 21. Otpatemalizma k partnerstvu (From Patemalism to Partnership) ed. A.N. Piliasov, Magadan, 1998:98.

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